IS THERE A CHURCH AROUND HERE?
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Psalm 40:1-10
John 8:12-20
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts to your word, that hearing we might believe, and believing, follow you and your will for us: through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

"Isn't there a church around here somewhere?" I was asked that question a ~~week or so ago~~ on the northwest corner of Michigan Avenue and Superior. I was hurrying to meet my date at a movie theater. (When I arrived, I discovered after waiting in a long ticket line that the movie we had agreed to see was actually playing at another theater, which is where she was waiting for me. But that's another story and not a pretty one). In any event, I was walking purposefully toward my destination, trying to avoid anyone who might slow me down, and in the late afternoon crowd, waiting for the light on the corner, was a man, appearing to be homeless, asking in a very loud voice, "Isn't there a ~~damn~~ church around here somewhere?" ~~Actually~~ the modifying adjective was ~~considerably ripe~~r. No one was paying attention. As city people learn to do, everybody was looking past or through him as his question was called out, even more loudly. It seemed appropriate for me to respond. So I did. I said, "Yes, sir, there's a church a few blocks north of here, Fourth Presbyterian Church. It's on the corner across from the Hancock building. You can't miss it. If you go to the door on Chestnut Street and tell the receptionist that I sent you, she'll see to it that you get some help." To which he responded impatiently, "I don't want help. I just want to pray!" I didn't have the heart to explain that at this hour the church was probably more prepared to give him a sandwich and a warm coat than a place to pray.

The encounter served as an illustration of a rather complex matter: the relationship of the church to the city and the role of the church in the city.

It's a very old issue, with its beginnings in antiquity. Historians point out that in the first century, as Christianity spread from its Hebrew Palestinian beginnings along the trade routes of the Roman Empire, the young church quickly became an urban institution. Paul wrote letters to churches in cities: Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Rome.

The issue is older than that even. In the sixth century B.C., God's people were living in one city and very much missing another city. They were citizens of Jerusalem now living in Babylon in captivity. The Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, in order to end once and for all the annoying rebelliousness of the Jews, had defeated their army, leveled their capital city, and drove its citizens across the dessert all the way back to Babylon and put them in a supervised ghetto

and kept them there, in captivity for seventy years or so. To say that the exiles were unhappy is an understatement. Psalm 137 gathers up their grief and their anger:

> By the rivers of Babylon—
> there we sat down and there we wept. . . .
> How could we sing the Lord's song
> in a foreign land?
> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
> let my right hand wither!
> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
> if I do not remember you, [Jerusalem].

They are terribly homesick. And as people separated from home for whatever reason have always done, they withdrew, turned inward, telling stories and singing songs of what used to be in that other city, spent their time pining away for the past or a future in which they would be wonderfully restored to their homes and families, or finally, waited for God's ultimate deliverance from this world of sadness, grief and suffering, to the next world. What they most certainly were not doing was paying attention to Babylon, the city in which they happened to be living.

Some of the greatest literature of our faith was written in the period of the exile, none more important than that by the prophet Jeremiah, who is back in burned-out Jerusalem writing letters to the exiles in Babylon.

Here's a part of a letter that must have stunned them when they read it:

> But seek the welfare of the city of where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

There's a new thought. Stop pining for the past and waiting for your future deliverance—pay attention to the present, the city in which you are living. Pay attention to it. Participate in it. Pray for it. Work to make it a better city. In its welfare is your welfare.

That, it seems to me, is the mission statement for the urban church and for this church in particular. In the city's welfare is your welfare.

The temptation has always been the opposite, to withdraw from the city. In E.L. Doctorow's novel *The City of God*, the author writes a stunning soliloquy on the city: "If you fly above it at night, it is a jeweled wonder of the universe, floating like a giant liner on the sea of darkness. It is smart, sophisticated, and breathtaking. And it glimmers and sparkles." But then, the problems: "More and more people move into it, the wretched of the earth stream into it. All at once it passes the point of self-containment. Its economy is insufficient, it becomes less able to employ, house, and feed the crowds that hunker in its streets." Smog thickens, crime increases."

There has always been a cultural antipathy to the city as well as a fascination. Non-city people are sometimes overwhelmed, afraid, annoyed by the busyness, fast pace, crowds, expressway traffic,

the sheer complexity of urban life, and can't wait to leave. Thomas Jefferson much preferred the serene simplicity of agrarian life—until, that is, he lived in Paris, and then he ran up huge shopping debts that he was never quite able to pay.

In addition to cultural ambiguity about cities as places morally inferior to the countryside, where there are green pastures and lots of space, the Christian faith has always had to resist the temptation to focus on some other world than this one, to organize itself around the premise that getting people to heaven is our real purpose and that one way to do that is to persuade people that the world is tainted, sinful, tempting, and that faithful people will simply not be too fond of it or committed to it.

Pray for the city, Jeremiah told the exiles. This world is the agenda. The Word became flesh and lived among us. God enters human history in the life of a man and lives that life thoroughly, experiencing everything it means to be human, its glory and despair, its joys and sadness, its appetites and hopes and fears and loves, and its death. The religion based on God's revelation in Jesus Christ is the worldliest of all religions. It is about God's love for the world and God's hopes for the human family living in this world.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life."

This church has always understood Jeremiah, that its mission is the city and that its welfare as a church is all wrapped up in the welfare of the city. This church has always understood that the incarnation, the coming of God into the life of the world, is its own mission statement—that the church exists to allow the Word to become flesh over and over again, in Christ-like life lived intentionally in the world.

Presby
Involvement in world
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We call ourselves a "Light in the City," and what a city it is. There's a wonderful new book, written by Fourth Church member Elmer Johnson, and sponsored by the Commercial Club of Chicago, the same organization that sponsored Daniel Burnham's plan a century ago, *Chicago Metropolis 2020: The Chicago Plan for the Twenty-First Century.*

In it, Johnson observes that nineteenth-century Chicago was the world's newest big city—a city that seemed to spring up spontaneously, a city that undertook some of the most ambitious public projects of the modern age, including Daniel Burnham's plan. That plan envisioned a diverse urban community living in harmony and creativity, and one of its lasting legacies is the extensive and wonderful system of public parks still available here, designed to be accessible to all the people of the city and to foster a sense of community among all its diverse citizens.

Something went wrong, terribly wrong, however, and our generation has the responsibility of dealing with it. What went wrong, of course, was racial and economic segregation. The book states, "The poor will need help because some of their problems are the result of deliberate public policy that encourages racial and economic segregation" (p. xiv).

What happened? In 1954, Chicago decided essentially to build a contained and restricted black ghetto. In *American Pharaoh*, a fine biography of Mayor Richard J. Daly by Adam Cohen and

Elizabeth Taylor, the story is told. Elizabeth Wood was the head of the Chicago Housing Authority and was working towards the goal of a racially and economically diverse and integrated city. Wood was a little too progressive and was pushed out and replaced and her policies reversed. The CHA refused to admit black people to all white public housing projects, opposed open-housing, called a halt to Wood's attempts to integrate, and eliminated her entrance process designed to create economic diversity, stopped using public money to promote integration. Cohen and Taylor conclude, "By abandoning managed integration, the CHA effectively decided that Chicago public housing would become housing for blacks" (p.113). By 1969, 99 percent of the tenants in CHA family housing would be black and Chicago would have one of the world's largest concentrations of poverty on its hands, with every social problem that accompanies poverty, and a reputation as the most segregated city in the nation. As she left office in 1954, Elizabeth Wood said, "The next generation will have to cure the slums created by this generation's official blindness" (p. 111).

So here we are, Chicagoans, fifty years later, and thanks be to God, there is a plan for transformation sponsored by a new Mayor Daly and a new CHA headed by Terry Peterson. Drive down Division Street or Chicago Avenue and you can see it emerging. Buildings are coming down, new mixed-income public and private sector housing is being built and will be built over the next ten years. The budget is 1.5 billion dollars and the target is 25,000 apartment units, and the key, instead of officially sponsored segregation, is officially supported mixture, racially and economically, with the emphasis on home ownership.

It is no exaggeration to say that the nation is watching Chicago, to see if it can happen. When Elmer Johnson enumerated the obstacles Chicago faces he listed three:

- Access to good healthcare and quality education for every child
- Accessible public transportation
- Transformation of the concentration of poverty and racial and social segregation to a balanced and diverse urban center

The mayor and the CHA are committed to making it happen, and the neighborhood west of here, which has so long helped this church define its mission, is one of the major places where that transformation will occur—is already occurring.

Fourth Presbyterian Church has always understood that the city is its focus, not because it is a congregation full of bleeding heart do-gooders (although, thanks be to God, that's true; there are a lot of wonderful do-gooders in this congregation.). The city is the focus because of the church's Lord, his love for and commitment to the world, his dying in the world and for the world, and his summons to follow him in the world. This church has always known that its welfare is in the city's welfare.

Not long before he died, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "It has been my conviction that any religion that professes to be concerned about the soul of man and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul is a spiritually moribund built religion only waiting for the day to be buried."

We are called by God to be part of what happens around us. We aspire to follow the light of the world, to be a "Light in the City." And we have called our new initiative, appropriately enough, "Project Light." You'll hear a lot about Project Light in the months ahead. It has two objectives. We call the first one inreach. We plan to build a facility here to house education, fellowship, and nurture for a congregation that has grown from 2,800 to nearly 5,000 members, a church school that has doubled in size, and a youth program that has tripled, a tutoring program that has grown from 150 to 500 students per week.

The second direction of Project Light is outreach. Because we aspire to be faithful to God and God's revelation in Jesus Christ, we envision a presence in the emerging, critical, and hopeful neighborhood west of here: a building, a presence where a new thing is happening, a place for people to gather and play together and learn together, a community center to be a necessary and vital bridge between people of ethnic, economic, and social diversity who will live there.

We do this because of our faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, not as a progressive add-on to our reformed faith, but because our faith is in one who lived thoroughly in the world and calls us to follow him, one who came out of that magnificent ancient understanding that the welfare of God's people is always bound up in the welfare of the city. We do this because he promised that our lives would be full and meaningful and joyful as we learn to follow him. We dare to do it because he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Is there a church around here somewhere?

You bet there is.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.